

Breaking Free from Perfectionism: Tips for a Healthier Work Life

What is Perfectionism?

Perfectionism is the pursuit of flawlessness. We've all sought perfection at times in our lives: 100% on a test, winning a competition, completing a flawless project. Striving for our best can help us grow and be better at what we do, but it can also be detrimental, having a negative effect on our mental health.

According to a 2024 *New York Times* article, rates of perfectionism have “skyrocketed” in college students between 2006-2022 based on the results of research using a Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale. The type of perfectionism that increased the most was “socially prescribed perfectionism” which is rooted in the belief that others expect you to be perfect.

“Perfectionism is a twenty-ton shield we lug around thinking it will protect us when, in fact, it’s the thing that’s really preventing us from taking flight.” —Brené Brown

Healthy Striving vs. Unhealthy Perfectionism

How can perfectionism be both good and bad? Perfectionism as a trait is complex. It can be adaptive or maladaptive (and you can have some of both).

Adaptive perfectionism is the healthy form of perfectionism. If you have this trait, you set high standards, work hard for success, desire growth, and enjoy being challenged.

A person displays **maladaptive perfectionism** when they are driven to achieve unrealistic goals and ideals. They are plagued with fear of failure, harsh self-criticism, and low self-esteem. This can lead to feelings of never being good enough, continuous dissatisfaction, and an inability to truly enjoy the things you've accomplished.

Signs You Might be a Perfectionist:

- You have high standards (sometimes unrealistic)
- Organization and structure are very important to you
- You dwell on mistakes, even the small ones
- You tend to procrastinate—put things off for fear of failure/not good enough
- You worry others will think less of you if you fail or don't achieve the best outcome
- Reluctance to delegate
- Get upset when things don't go as planned.

Want to learn more about your own perfectionism tendencies? Take this 20-question quiz from *Psychology Today*:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/tests/personality/perfectionism-test>

A Healthy Balance

If you have perfectionistic traits, remember, it's not all bad. Some of these traits are adaptive and serve you positively by focusing on growth, hard work, and achieving positive results. Focus on decreasing the perfectionistic tendencies that are maladaptive. In other words, you need to find the "sweet spot" where you are striving to do your best but not beating yourself up.

*"Healthy striving is self-focused:
'How can I improve?'"*

*Perfectionism is other-focused:
'What will they think?'"*

—Brené Brown

Practical Tips:

1. Get some distance from your thoughts (ex: Will this problem/issue matter in 3 months? Imagine a respected colleague in a similar situation.)
2. Evaluate your expectations—are they realistic?
3. Practice self-compassion—how would you speak to a friend or colleague about this?
4. Set realistic deadlines
5. Notice examples of when you HAVE survived mistakes
6. Practice doing some things less perfectly
 - a. Leave a little mess
 - b. Try something new that you know you won't be good at! Notice that you survived it and maybe even enjoyed it!
7. Embrace humility—accept that perfection is impossible and you will fall short
8. Challenge the belief that your self-worth is dependent on your performance

"The most valuable thing you can make is a mistake. You can't learn anything from being perfect." —Adam Osbourne

Further Resources:

AAEP Member Assistance Program: Counseling sessions are available as part of your AAEP membership. Call 1-800-633-3353 to speak to a qualified clinician, 24 hours day, 7 days a week. Online resources can be found at Healthy Practice Member Assistance Program - AAEP

Employee Assistance Program: Ask your manager if you have access to therapy, coaching or counseling through an employee assistance program at your practice.

Podcast: Adam Grant Breaking Up with Perfectionism | WorkLife with Adam Grant
<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3ohEu8zArUuGk2hT5aoluW?si=f5G536vTCWiQNyzDJCatw>

Quick Read: How to Be Less Self-Critical When Perfectionism Is a Trap - The New York Times
<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/11/well/mind/perfectionism-social-comparison.html>

Deeper Dive: Centre for Clinical Interventions Perfectionism Workbook
<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/Resources/Looking-After-Yourself/Perfectionism>

Additional Practice Culture Resources:

